Ruth Kullman Transcript

Rosalind Hinton: -- New Orleans, Louisiana. Today is Wednesday, November 8th, 2006. I'm conducting the interview for the Katrina's Jewish Voices project of the Jewish Women's Archive and the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Ruth, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video recorded?

Ruth Kullman: I do.

RH: OK. So why don't we start out with a little about your background, your general and your Jewish education, and how you came to be in New Orleans?

RK: I was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma and grew up in a family that practiced Conservative Judaism. And it was a big part of our lives. We went to synagogue regularly and my parents participated - my father was the Jewish caterer, the kosher caterer, and my mother was very involved. I came to New -- I can't remember all the questions you asked me in that one question, but what brought me to New Orleans really was to come to college here. My brother had come to Tulane and we just followed eight years later.

RH: OK. And tell me a little bit about -- you went to Newcomb?

RK: I did. I did. Yeah.

RH: And what was that like?

RK: Well, it was hard at first because New Orleans is very different than Tulsa, Oklahoma in a lot of ways. But I met some wonderful people. Had some good friends. The education was interesting and fulfilling. And think I grew up a lot. But New Orleans was a different place to be. Very unique in both positive and --

RH: Can you describe --

RK: It felt like it was a party all the time. It was a constant costume party in some ways. There were parades and there were celebrations and there was the French Quarter and that was kind of frightening to me. Tulsa, Oklahoma is not only -- it's a dry county. So you don't have a lot of exposure to alcohol or that kind of thing. So then this was kind of a free spirit place. And actually I vowed that I would not live the rest of my life in New Orleans. And here I am. So then I moved to Dallas for a year and then came back for graduate school.

RH: OK. And what did you go to graduate school in?

RK: I got my Masters in Social Work from Tulane as well.

RH: OK. And why did you stay in New Orleans?

RK: I fell in love with my husband. And he's from New Orleans. His family is from here. And he never thought about living anyplace else. This is where he wanted to be. And I wanted to be with him. And that's what happened. And it's a very different place now for me as an adult than it was as a shy, somewhat naive adolescent.

RH: So tell me about that a little bit.

RK: You mean -- which part? About --

RH: Just that it's different for you as an adult.

RK: Oh, you know, you have -- you make a life for -- you make a permanent home for yourself. [Noise in background] This is my dog. I didn't even think about her being a problem.

RH: Let’s -- all right.

RK: You asked me what it was like. How it was different to be an adult here. Well, you make couple friends, you have children, you get interested in causes and activities. It's not just go to class, go play. It's just a different life. I think anybody would understand that. But with my husband being from here there was a certain group of people who I could become friends with. But after a while I found that I was friends more with other women who had not grown up here in addition to the ones who had lived here all their lives. It just -- and it was an accepting place in that respect. If you were willing to work hard and put yourself out there, people were very happy to make a place for you. So I got involved in lots of things pretty quickly.

RH: Describe your connections to the Jewish community. Have they been important to you in your years here?

RK: They've been probably the most important -- one of the most important parts of my life here. My Jewish identity was part of me from my growing up years. I was very active in youth group and went to leadership activities and involved in social action projects as a young adult. So it just -- I belonged to a Jewish sorority. My friends at Tulane were primarily Jewish. So the Jewish community here became very important to me. And in fact for most of my career, my career as a social worker, it was working for Jewish agencies. So we lived here for three years and then moved away for a year. We lived in Washington, DC. My husband worked with Moon Landrieu when he was secretary of HUD. So when I came back I got a job at Jewish Family Service and worked there for nine years. Worked at Tulane for a couple years but then went to work at the Jewish Federation for five and a half years. So 14 of really the 18 years I worked as a professional social worker were in Jewish agencies. So it was professional as well as personal.

RH: Describe the Jewish community. You know --

RK: Oh, that's a hard question.

RH: What do you like about it?

RK: Well, I was raised Conservative but I really was drawn to the Reform Jewish community here because of its social activism. And so I think that's a wonderful part of the Jewish community, even though we're a small part of New Orleans. People are always struck by the leadership, the number of people who are involved in leadership in the general community, who contribute to the general community, who are involved in political action, social action. And I think the Jewish community is a very caring community for one another as well as for the broader world. [Noise from dog] I don't know what to do about her. She'll be fine.

RH: She's OK. We'll ignore her.

RK: Yeah, we'll ignore her.

RH: We know she's there, so we won’t pay attention to her.

RK: Yeah. I have a dog. She's a big part of my life. She's not Jewish. So I think it's an accepting Jewish community. It doesn't feel restrictive or limiting or like I bet -- I would imagine some other Jewish communities are. But also I've been willing to reach out. And I think that makes people respond more than just wait.

RH: Reach out --

RK: Get involved in certain activities. Take responsibility for certain projects, things like that.

RH: Do you have any memories of any particular Jewish events pre-Katrina that stand out to you?

RK: Sometimes I think it's the non-big events that certain services I guess at Touro, certain speakers at Federation events. I think the missions that I took to Israel were

especially important in my life. Gave me a connection with Israel and with the broader Jewish community, the worldwide Jewish community. I don't -- I can't really tell you that there were any particular other events that -- I'll remember when you leave of course, but nothing that really comes to me right now.

RH: OK. What are some of the activities you like to do in the larger city, in the New Orleans community?

RK: In the larger city? Well, I'm a big pro-choice advocate. So a lot of my volunteer effort has been involved with pro-choice activism. I was board chair of Planned Parenthood of Louisiana and on the board for about forever, about nine years, and still support that organization. And I was actively involved in an organization called Committee of 21 to get women elected to public office. I've been involved in political campaigns in Democratic politics. Volunteering, helping to raise money and in fact working on campaigns. So those I would say are the primary areas that I've been involved in.

RH: Why don't we move to the Katrina story? And talk to me about really when Katrina came on your personal radar screen.

RK: Well, we have a situation in our family that my husband being a native just doesn't pay much attention to storms. I guess you've heard that story before. And so I feel it's my responsibility to go the opposite direction, to monitor. Not obsessively. But this was different. This was big. And we went -- I was watching it Thursday and Friday. Friday night I can tell you exactly what happened. I'm sure most people remember every moment like it was yesterday. Friday night we always have dinner together, Shabbat dinner. And I was newly installed as president of Touro. So I went to Friday night services and then came to dinner. My mother-in-law, who is going to be 95 in a couple of weeks, up until Katrina always had dinner for everyone. And I went to dinner and my two nieces were there and they said we've made a reservation in Houston. We're leaving

tomorrow to go to Houston. And they always are the first to flee, because they have little babies and don't want to be here. And I said what are you talking about, it's going to Florida. And they said oh no it's shifted. And I said I can't believe it. And so I went home and looked and sure enough, you know, people were talking about it. And then Saturday morning I went to a bar mitzvah. And everybody -- it was clear that it was now a big deal. And this poor family that had planned the party Saturday night and the brunch on Sunday, and in fact I had 80 people coming for dinner Sunday night because we have a new Rabbi. We had a new Rabbi. He's not new anymore. And so I'd invited all the staff and the entire board and people from the synagogue to dinner. So the phone started ringing. People were canceling. People were leaving. I'm not going to be at dinner. And I walked into the house after the bar mitzvah and I said to my husband, you know, I don't know, I know what you're going to say is that we're not leaving, and he said we're not -- I don't see any reason to leave. The old I didn't leave in Camille and I didn't leave in -- I said I want us to act as if we're leaving even though we're not planning to. I want us to prepare as if we're leaving. And in fact that morning he always -- he plays golf. And I said do me a favor, get gas and get money, before you do anything else. So he called me at 7:30 and says OK I've got gas and I've got money. And I said OK then that'll keep the storm away. We've done our thing. So that afternoon we closed things up and moved furniture, pool furniture in. Took things down and moved some objects and stuff like that. And then went to dinner at a friend's house. And everybody there was leaving. They were leaving at midnight or 4:00 the next morning or whatever. But we weren't leaving. And they kept -- in fact they were pretty worried the next day because then it really got to be clear that people had to leave. And they were concerned we had not decided to leave. So we got home about 11:00 and watched TV for a while and went to bed. And about 6:00 my husband said -- I'm just lying in bed thinking. I am so nervous about staying. And he said to me, he said why aren't you turning on the TV. And I said it's not going to make any difference. We're not leaving. And so he got out of bed and he went and looked at the computer and he came back and he said what are you afraid

of. And I said I'm afraid of two things. One the noise from a storm that big, what it will sound like, the wind. And what are we going to do about the dog. And also I'm worried about your mother. Because she lives in an apartment and she doesn't want to leave her apartment and she would have come to our house, but you know, how can we take care of her, she's 93 years old. And he said I think we should leave. And then -- I'm not clear whether he called my mother-in-law or my mother-in-law called and said they're telling everybody we have to get out of our building. But he says he called my mother-in-law and said we're leaving and if you want to come with us -- I don't know what Paul and Marilyn are going to do, my brother-in-law and sister-in-law, but if you want to come we'll come get you. And then according to my sister-in-law she said then my mother-in-law called them and said we're leaving, and you need to come with us, you have to leave. I think the fact that they evacuated her building really frightened her. That had never happened either. So my husband said pack as if we're going to be gone for three days. I'm sure you've heard that before too. So we put some things together in a little overnight case. And put some of the food, not the full food for 80 people, but took one of the briskets, left two, took some of the food, put it in the back of our car, and went to pick up my mother-in-law and waited for my brother-in-law and sister-in-law. And waited and waited and waited. They were busy moving things upstairs to the -- they have a two-story house. And then they had to go take care of their business. So we didn't leave till 10:00 that morning on Sunday. Oh, we called my sister. I have a twin sister who lives in Memphis. And she had called Saturday and said come stay with us. Come stay with me. She's divorced and has two kids, both of whom were out of the house. So she was living alone. She said you all just come stay with us. So we got on the road and we called her and said we're coming. And he said there are five of us and a dog. And she said OK. And he said I don't know if we'll get that far, if we'll stay, come that far. It just depends on gas and things like that. And she said you've got to come, you know, where are you going to stay, in a hotel? So we got on the road. We went and we drove for 12 hours, which isn't that bad considering it usually takes six. And we got in about 10:00

that night. And that's where we were. Started watching.

RH: Started watching TV.

RK: Started trying to figure out what was happening.

RH: And can you relay some of that? What was going on while you were watching?

RK: Well, it was just -- it was an out of body experience really, to watch it and then be grateful that it looked like -- oh I remember I do have this other memory. We're driving in the car and we're listening to the radio. And trying to reach our kids, one of whom was in New York and the other was in Spokane, Washington. Not able to get through obviously. Nobody's cell phones were working at that particular time. So they don't really have an idea. They can't reach us. We can't reach them. It was the first time I figured out how to do text messaging because all of a sudden this message pops up on my phone and it's from one of our kids. And my husband kept saying they're wrong, they're wrong, it's not going to be that bad. They don't know what they're talking about. And I wanted to say they're the experts. They know it's the storm of the century, what were some of the words they used on the radio, “catastrophic” I think. Catastrophic storm. So the next day we watch it and it comes and it goes and it looks like there's a lot of wind and rain, but we're going to be back. And then Tuesday morning we wake up and, you know, we're not going to be back, and we don't know how bad it is, and we don't know except that it's bad. And I had this feeling like I don't know if -- you don't know if you'll get back or when you'll get back or how you'll get back, and I had this sense that I would never get back. And every day felt like a year then. We were staying with my sister-in-law and everybody was on top of each other, and it was loud and phones were ringing, and every -- I was kind of reeling from all that. But --

RH: So tell me, were you trying to contact anybody?

RK: Well, I had been in touch primarily with the Rabbi and the Cantor. And trying to keep in touch with -- I keep -- it was more my -- well we knew where all the family was, so that wasn't an issue. They were all -- my nieces were in Houston and the rest of the family was with us. So we knew we were all safe. So there wasn't that stress. We were trying to reach friends and friends were trying to reach us.

RH: Did you have a housekeeper or anybody like that?

RK: I did have a housekeeper. She had left Saturday. Interesting, she is the one person I know who her brother who stayed ended up surviving the storm and then drowning after the levees broke. So she was obviously devastated and has not -- she I think is back in New Orleans but she's really never come out of it. Back to -- she never came back to work, never -- we saw her -- I've seen her, but she doesn't return my phone calls. And I think she's still struggling. And she'd been working with me for 23 years. So it's a big shift for us. But oh the hardest part was we didn't know where the two custodians were from the synagogue. We have one who's worked with us for probably 20 years, and then his cousin or nephew who's worked with us for a couple of years. And we had no idea for at least two and a half weeks whether they had survived. We had no way of contacting them, they didn't answer their cell phones. But they finally surfaced and were OK as well. But that was a pretty frightening time. And there was this -- but it was mainly trying to reach people, members of the congregation. Who knows where everybody is? [Phone rings] Do you want to turn that off? But it was primarily dealing with the synagogue issues, where was everybody, was everybody safe, trying to start making a list and identifying locations where congregants were. And then getting executive committee members together, trying to get phone numbers, trying to bring people together on the phone to see what we were going to do about the synagogue, was the synagogue OK, had people seen it, what were the reports, things like that.

RH: I talked to Rabbi Busch, and he was incredibly grateful for you. And I wonder if you could tell a little about your interactions with him, because here's this person who was brand new. And had his own kind of isolation.

RK: Right, I felt it's one thing to feel bad for yourself, I mean, I felt bad for me because it's a loss of a way of life for all of us, whether we had our houses or didn't. And you knew that you could never -- it was never going to be the same. It was never going to be the same again. But for him he had just moved his family. He'd just started a new job. He had -- I had seen where he came from. He came from a lovely community, a wonderful congregation that loved him. He had uprooted his family and three weeks later they don't know whether they have a congregation or a home. How horrible. And not to have people who he had these connections with who could -- he was -- but in the midst of all that he was expected to be there for everybody else. And he was. I think there were some moments when he was pretty shaken and understandably so, but he pretty quickly just started going about the business of taking care of his congregants. So I felt really that it was my responsibility to try and take care of him, because nobody else -- I mean, he had his wife and children, but, you know --

RH: What kind of reassurance did you --

RK: They were going to get -- everybody was going to get paid. Help him make -- let's make decisions together, you don't have to take all the responsibility, let me -- who do I know in Houston who could be helpful to you, just to be another -- just to be somebody to bounce things off and ask -- help make decisions, because he has the responsibility, and it's hard to take full responsibility for a congregation you don't even know. You don't know the people. So that I felt was really what I needed to do, to be there for the synagogue. And the rest of the staff didn't really know him. So they needed some support as well so that they could then turn around and support other people. But I'm so appreciative of what he did, and for his kind words, because I know he's grateful, but

really I'm the one who's grateful. So many -- I'm sure -- so many people just left skid marks, they just cut and run. And he may have thought it, but he didn't do it. And I guess it solidifies a commitment, you're either in or you're out. And I guess he decided he was in, or they were in.

RH: But you said a minute ago that you were aware pretty early that the life as you knew it was never going to be the same. Could you talk a little about that, please?

RK: Well, you didn't have a sense that -- I had a sense that I didn't know who would come back in terms of my friends or not. I didn't know if I'd have any work. My husband didn't know whether he'd have a firm. We didn't know whether we had -- I felt like I had this big house that was going to be worth nothing. It was going to be a house in a wasteland. I felt incredibly lucky at the same time, because I knew that we were safe, and that we would be OK regardless. Financially we would be OK. But it's funny to be getting gift cards and things like that from friends and offers of resources that we fortunately didn't have to take people up on their offers, but for a family that is used -- for a family and a person who's used to giving, it was hard to be on the receiving end. Or to --

RH: Tell me about receiving, what were --

RK: We would go to meetings, a meeting in Memphis that the Jewish community, free dinners, gift cards, do you need food, do you need clothing. Actually I had no clothes. I had two T-shirts and three pairs of shorts. So family members sent me clothing until we could get back in. So you had kind of a taste of what it was like when you're on the other side. Very temporarily, but still it was an odd feeling.

RH: Did you connect to the Jewish community in Memphis?

RK: Well, I have to tell you that Rabbi Greenstein in Memphis was truly unbelievable to us. He came over and that was probably one of the most emotional moments for our

family. He came over and talked to us as if we had suffered a death. Because he knew, he understood that everybody was in mourning, and he got all -- at this point my brother-in-law, who is so -- kind of keeps feeling so much inside of him, was able to really express what he felt, and how, I guess, frightened in many ways he was. And he just listened. And asked questions and allowed us to kind of -- everybody was crying and then he went about the business of what can I do to help you. So he found us apartments. He found my husband an offer of office space. He got my nieces' children in nursery school. The phone was ringing within an hour of people who were ready to -- he just went back and started taking care of us. There were many people, there were probably about 60 people from New Orleans I think who had gone to Memphis or it could have been more. That was in the Reform congregation. I think there were a lot of Orthodox families because there's a strong Orthodox community in Memphis. But he was really amazing. And then on top of all this my mother-in-law got critically ill. And so we spent the majority of the time we were in Memphis with her in either ICU or in the hospital. He got the doctor. He came and visited her. When the doctor didn't show up he got us a different doctor. There was nothing that was too much. And --

RH: Was her illness do you think kind of related to the stress?

RK: It was -- yes. It was exacerbated by the stress. She really -- I think all she wanted was to get back to New Orleans. And yet either get back to New Orleans or she was happy if she just didn't make it out of the hospital -- I mean not happy but she didn't -- she suffered two strokes, she lost the vision in one of her eyes. She had congestive heart failure. She just went downhill in a hurry and really has never recovered. She went from living independently and going out three times a week and having dinner for 12 or 15 of us every day to now having 24-hour-a-day help. And having trouble -- it was a question of whether she would come back and live in a nursing home or even get back -- all we wanted to do was get her back. And she has rallied a little bit, but she's pretty frail. So it really was a result of the stress of the entire experience. So that was another

complicating factor. We were taking care of her. I think I told you -- my brother-in-law was very sick at the time. He was living in Bellingham, Washington, and he got -- the last really time we saw him was when he managed to get himself on a plane and come see his mother, who was in the hospital, and all of us. And he died last spring. He had leukemia. And so he made it -- that was really the last time she saw him.

RH: So he managed in that space of time that you were in Memphis, he came to Memphis.

RK: Right. Yeah.

RH: So my God. It's compounded.

RK: So there was yeah, there were a lot of issues going on. And then my brother-in-law and sister-in-law lost their home and both their children lost everything. So that was even more to deal with.

RH: Where were they living?

RK: My brother-in-law and sister-in-law, who are living with us still, lived in Lakewood South. They moved in with us in July and are trying to finish their home. And my two nieces both lived in Lakeview and lost everything, so they --

RH: So you were with these people.

RK: Yeah.

RH: And you -- how did you find out about your home?

RK: Google, whatever, the googleearth.com, we knew. And we knew pretty quickly that we were fine. Our house was fine. And they knew pretty quickly that theirs were not. Their houses were not. My brother-in-law and sister-in-law just wanted to -- were praying

that their house didn't flood on the second floor, because in the waiting that we kept waiting for them to come, they had moved everything of any kind of meaning, their art, their pictures, any kind of furniture they could move, they had moved up to the second floor. And all that was saved. So they lost upholstered -- they lost a lot, and they lost -- but they didn't lose the things that meant so much to them.

RH: That was more foresight than most people.

RK: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

RH: Was there any strain at all because you were --

RK: We had a house and they didn't?

RH: Right.

RK: Well, no, I don't know if they felt why me, I felt -- I didn't necessarily feel guilty, I felt grateful that we had -- I guess did I feel guilty, I'm sure there's the survivor's kind of guilt, but no, I think we just tried to do whatever we could to help them. Anything they saved is in our house. They moved everything into their house. The girls, anything that they could save is in our backhouse. They're living with us. And I just -- my heart breaks that they had to go through what they did. But I don't feel guilty. I feel grateful.

RH: There's a kind of a way that the whole family unit suffered, but you were able to help at least, that one house is OK.

RK: Right, right, yeah, we're the place where everybody comes. We're now doing the Friday night dinners, we do all the family occasions.

RH: Is that right?

RK: We keep -- yeah. And so my nieces have both bought new houses and are -- I don't think you ever move on, but are trying to move on, and my sister-in-law and brother-in-law are close to finishing their house, and I think it's going to be fabulous. And it's been a struggle. It's been stressful. It's been a terrible ordeal to try and get it done, but I think they're going to be very happy in the house.

RH: While you were away, were there -- how did you keep together? Do you know?

RK: Well, I don't know that I did. Sometimes I think that people tell me that the more stress that I'm in my way of coping is just to try and be as calm as possible. And when we were -- I'll tell you a lot of it had to do with my sister. I was with my twin sister and she was fabulous. And that was a role reversal kind of thing too because she's been divorced and had to raise these two kids by herself. She's done a fabulous job. She's very successful. She works hard. She had a great job. But if she's ever needed anything it was Larry and I who would try and help her. And all of a sudden now we need help and she's the one helping us and so in many ways it leveled the playing field. She wasn't just the sister that everybody tries to take care of. She was the person who was taking care of us. And we really couldn't have done it without her. She was taking care of everybody. My in-laws, my mother-in-law. She's very grounded in Memphis. She's been there for a long time. She knows a lot of people. And she would come by every -- well we were living with her but when we didn't live with her -- we finally moved out. All of us moved out and got apartments, which is what I think saved us. But she took great care of us and we got so close. We've always been close. We're twins. But it was a whole different relationship. And so probably that's what kept me sane. And also I told my husband early on because we were under a lot of stress and I said look we've got to make it through this. We're just going to have to make it through because if we let this get to us then we're not going to make it. And not that -- we've never had problems, but I could just tell that there's so much stress that we just had to be there for one another. And no matter what we were going to stick this, get through this together. And so I think

that really helped too. And my kids were great. So they rose to the occasion too.

RH: Tell me about that a little bit.

RK: Well they were devastated. They both wanted to drop -- one, our son teaches in -- was teaching in New York at the time. He's since moved back and is teaching here in New Orleans. And our daughter was doing her first year of her internship in Spokane. Both of them wanted to leave and just come back to New Orleans once we got home. Gut houses, clean up, take care of sick people, whatever it was, they wanted to come back. And we just encouraged them to stay away, not to stay away permanently, but that they had both worked so hard to get where they were. My daughter, go through medical school and get the internship she wanted, her first choice, and do what she's always wanted to do, and then to -- they wouldn't let her leave. So she was just going to drop out. And I said you cannot do that. They're trying to get everybody out of New Orleans who's sick. They're just going to ship you someplace else. You just got to stay and take care of the people who really need you. And my son was working in the South Bronx and I said you've got a lot of work to do there. But he did, he followed through with his commitment, he wanted to come back and teach in a new school here, so that's what he's doing.

RH: Where's he teaching?

RK: At one of the new KIPP schools on South Carrollton. It's a new charter school starting with fifth grade and he's a social studies teacher there.

RH: Oh wow.

RK: And it's hard work.

RH: I imagine so.

RK: But I felt a tremendous amount of support from them too. So and other family members and people who you don't hear from for years and years and they're calling and wanting, there was this just incredible outpouring of caring and support. And for the synagogue too. I have been so moved by the generosity from people across the country for the Jewish community here. It's overwhelming that people would reach out like that. And so that's a huge --

RH: Can you give some examples?

RK: Well people sending money, sending books, wanting to help, coming down here and volunteering. Congregations, the national Jewish Reform organized the URJ, which is Union for Reform Judaism, raised money for the congregations. They sent staff down here. They brought a mission so people could see firsthand and do work. They've been tremendously -- there were weekly conference calls with them, what can they do, how are we doing, sending -- helping us meet our payrolls initially. So we wouldn't have to lay off any staff. Limit any programs until we really could figure out where we were. So it's hard not to pull yourself up and get yourself together, because so many people were trying to help. You got to help yourself too, can't leave it all to everybody else.

RH: So what was the decision that you had to make around the synagogue? About coming back or where to have a synagogue in exile?

RK: Right. Many decisions. What would our clergy be doing? Where would they -- first of all, where were they going? Where were they going to go and how were they going to operate? So they basically anchored themselves in Houston. One of the congregations in Houston gave them office space and so our Cantor and our Rabbi and our Executive Director were all in Houston. And then where were our members and get them on the road to try and contact our membership. We spent a lot of time talking about holiday services. Where were we going? How could we reach the most, the largest number of congregants? Taking care of the facility, we had -- we didn't flood but we had an oil spill

in our basement. Don't even ask me from where. We had four feet of water in the basement, which somehow released a reserve of oil. I don't know how many hundreds of gallons. So we were an environmental -- we were a toxic -- treated like a toxic waste. So we had to go through an environmental cleanup, we had to shut down the building till the middle of January. We had all those decisions in terms of trying to take care of that. We could only operate in the chapel. We couldn't operate the main building because of the smell. Scrubbing the building down, getting the air, so the --

RH: So was this the offices also?

RK: Offices, the sanctuary, the educational wing, the entire main building of Touro Synagogue had to be shut down. So even though people were coming back we had to regroup in other -- we could have -- actually we had services in the chapel and I'm sure Rabbi Busch told you about Rosh Hashanah morning. That incredible --

RH: Tell me.

RK: Well I wasn't here, but Rabbi Busch did decide to come and conduct Rosh Hashanah morning services. People were allowed back in the city and he said if we can get back in we're going to have services. And he said I don't know if there's going to be 30 or 40 or 50 people. But there were 250 people. The chapel only holds about 180. So they were all in the entranceway and out that way and there were first responders and National Guardsmen and people sitting all over the pulpit, in the aisles, he said -- and I think for the Cantor and the Rabbi they were both here, it was probably one of the most moving experiences that they will ever have as Jewish professionals, as clergy. But --

RH: Did they call you and tell you --

RK: Yes, it was amazing, yeah, I was so sorry I wasn't here but so happy that they had done it. I wanted, I spent -- I did go to Houston for services for Yom Kippur so I could be at the Touro congregation services there, but just felt that where I needed to be was with

my family.

RH: So did you go to the Rosh Hashanah services --

RK: In Memphis yeah.

RH: In Memphis. What was that like for you?

RK: Well I had been in that congregation before because of my niece's and nephew's b'nai mitzvah and it was strange. It wasn't -- it was like it was a different -- it wasn't being home, it wasn't like being home. But people were very warm and welcoming. They asked me to sit on the pulpit because I was President of Touro. And gave me that honor, so that was lovely. People couldn't have -- everybody has been wonderful. So but there were lots of decisions to make about the congregation and finances, what were we going to do financially, what were we going to do programmatically, but mainly about the building. We had a lot of -- even though we didn't -- as I said we didn't flood but we had a lot of issues related to getting it back up and running.

RH: So you came back before the building was open. What was the decision-making process for your family to return?

RK: Well we were very eager to get back. [Phone rings] Want me to turn it off? Yeah you want to change --

RH: The decision --

RK: Oh my husband really wanted to come back because first of all he needed to get his business going, back up and running. His partners had opened up an office in Baton Rouge. And two of the four partners were there. And he was -- you know, he just felt like he needed to try and work again. And then I wanted to come back. And we own a building, a duplex not far from here, that in fact did flood, five and a half feet. So we

wanted to start working on that.

RH: Why don't you stop a minute and tell me about where you live, the street you're on, 18 --

RK: OK, yeah, 1838 State Street. It is very close to Tulane University. It is what I think -- lots of trees, it's lots of families, it's comfortable, larger homes, not far from Saint Charles Avenue.

RH: And it didn't flood?

RK: Seven houses away at Freret Street is where it stopped. So the water came within a half a block from where we are and then it didn't cross the street. I guess it rises enough from that intersection that I guess as you go towards the river it gets higher and it just didn't cross. So we had a lot of -- you couldn't get to our house because of the trees that were down. But we didn't get -- we had roof damage and gutter damage and flooding in our basement, but nothing of substance as far as compared to 80% of the other people in New Orleans. We wanted to come back as soon as we had power and as soon as we knew that the water was potable. And we came back about three or four days after that.

RH: And so was that your first visit back?

RK: My husband had come back a couple of times. Once to get a car and once to get some clothes. And to get into his office. I think he was able to get into his office as well and get some files. But I had not been back.

RH: What was that like?

RK: I was really anxious about it. First of all I was driving my mother-in-law back. And she was -- I was anxious about how she was going to survive the trip or not. It was

extremely hard on her. We took a six-hour trip and divided it into two days just to try and make -- get her through it. And I didn't know what I would see when I drove through. But even by then it was different, according to my husband. Things, trees had been cleared, and it was very very quiet here. It was extraordinarily quiet. No children, no traffic, just National Guardsmen. There weren't a lot -- we were one of the first people back on our block. It was very quiet.

RH: Were there places to go for food?

RK: Not much. Not much. One drugstore nearby, grocery stores were open but not full days. Gas stations were hard to find. I don't even know what I did when I came back. I can't tell you. That part is more of a blur than anything else, those first few weeks coming back. I didn't work, I don't think I was working.

RH: Did you go out to the lakefront to see?

RK: We did, yeah. Well actually I don't think when I came back you could even get there. I think it was still flooded. So you couldn't really get there. You couldn't really get past Claiborne. So your world was very small. You couldn't get very far. So we had Friday night services and every week there were additional people who showed up. It was like greeting long-lost family members. But I was probably on the phone a lot but I don't remember -- we didn't have phone service for a long time, but cell phones were invaluable. And there was a lot to do to clean up. Our house was filthy, the yard was filthy, we had a duplex that had to be emptied and gutted and work started on that. There was a lot to do in terms of those kinds of tasks. But I can't tell you what I did. I think everything took longer. I think that's what it was, you go someplace and you stood in lines. You get a prescription filled, it would take an hour. I remember that. You go to the grocery, there's long lines, because there's only one -- nobody could find help. So I think everything took a lot longer.

RH: What anchored you at that time? Can you remember? Maybe you weren't anchored.

RK: I don't think I was. I guess family. I know what else happened. My mother-in-law went back in the hospital. So she was in the hospital. I think we got home five days and then she went back in for about a month. So we were very busy being with her, trying to take care of her and --

RH: Where was she in the hospital?

RK: She was at Touro. Touro opened and it was bare bones, I'll tell you. But I think she didn't really come out until right before Thanksgiving. And so that was time-consuming. Because we would trade off being up there with her.

RH: And did the rest of the family come? Were they living with you by then? Or did they come later?

RK: No they didn't. Actually we've had somebody living with us the -- we have a very close friend and he -- his apartment, he's divorced and his house flooded and his apartment was -- he had moved into an apartment. And there was no elevator or water. So he lived with us for about a month. And then we had about three weeks with nobody living with us and then we took in an eighth grader, one of Larry's law partners had moved to Baton Rouge and couldn't find housing to come back. And one of his -- his daughter was very unhappy in Baton Rouge, wanted to come back to school at Newman. And so we kept her for a semester so she could go to school here. And then once she left we had about a month with nobody and then my brother-in-law and sister-in-law lost their apartment that they had rented and they moved in with us. So they moved in in July. So it's been --

RH: So how have you enjoyed having all this company?

RK: Well, it's really OK. There are times when it would be nice just to be back to the two of us. You know, you get spoiled, you eat when you want, you eat what you want. You do what you want. But I'm always -- I think it's been a great gift in some ways too. Especially with my brother-in-law and sister-in-law to be able to spend the time with them. And all that time we were in Memphis my mother-in-law was living with us. So that was a little unusual to have really the constant care of an older adult. Making sure she was bathed and -- we had help but many times it was one of us who -- what's she going to eat, when's she going to eat, has she taken her medicine, does she need to go to the doctor, those kinds of issues that many people deal with a long time, we had it, and then when we came back she moved in with my brother-in-law and sister-in-law. So we shared the responsibility, but it was in many ways a gift to be able to spend time with her too. My husband said he just wished he could see her more. And I told him she lives here but you'll see her on Friday nights and you might talk to her one other time. This was pre-Katrina. And he said I really should spend more time with my mother. And I said well the hurricane gave you that opportunity. You had weeks with your mother. And she's very undemanding and very grateful for anything everybody does for her. So it makes it easier. She's not demanding or anything like that. But it'll be nice when everybody has their own space. We have plenty of space for everybody, but I still think in many ways as much for them as for us it'll be nice when they can have their own home. They want to be home.

RH: Has there been any need to negotiate any --

RK: Who's going to cook dinner when, that's about as bad as it gets really, yeah.

RH: What kind of responsibilities have you taken upon yourself in this recovery mode?

RK: Well I feel like my main responsibility is Touro, because there's going to be a lot of difficult decisions to be made once we determine Touro Synagogue post-Katrina, how big are we going to be, what kind of staff do we need to have, how do we adjust to a

shrinking Jewish population, what do our members need now that perhaps they didn't need before, trying to identify new leadership because several of our board members left town. So I feel like my main responsibility beyond my family is to make sure that Touro is as healthy and prosperous and thriving as possible while I'm President through this transition period. Because it really is a transition period. We have a new Rabbi, we're looking for a new Cantor, there's a lot of challenges. So I spend a lot of time and energy in thinking about that. I want to be here for my family. I feel like there's stresses that we're all going through. So I've taken -- we all have taken that on, but to be supportive to them. And I've taken on some work. I got very involved in the mayoral campaign.

RH: We're going to -- before you finish that thought let's go to another --

END OF PART 1

RH: And we were just talking about how you got involved in the mayoral race.

RK: Right. Well you had asked the question about my contributions I guess to the recovery. And I had worked on Mitch's lieutenant governor's race. And raised money statewide for him in that campaign. And then when he decided -- when he was thinking about running for Mayor, I was in a small group meeting about what we thought about it, and I told him I don't know if you can win, but I don't know how you can't run. You know, you just -- you are the person I think who can turn the city around. He could bring people together. Obviously he made the decision to run. And I went to work for him. I was his Finance Director. Which meant that I was responsible for all the fundraising for the campaign, doing it, making sure it happened, the events, the calls, anything that had anything to do with money was under my auspices except spending it. I didn't get the chance to spend it, I just had to raise it. And it was one of the most challenging tasks I've taken on. In my professional life I'm not typically doing political campaigns. I'm doing campaigns for nonprofits. But because I believed in him we made the decision that whatever it would take I would do the job. Because it's seven days a week, 12- and 14-

hour days. Wouldn't be able to do anything else. Larry would have to pick up a lot of the pieces. The people at the synagogue understood that I would do whatever I could. But that this was bigger -- this was in many ways bigger than all of us. It was that important for the future of the city, we thought, to have Mitch be successful.

RH: What were the attributes that you felt like he had?

RK: Well I think he had an incredible commitment to the people. Mitch, if you know him, he feels very comfortable in any group. He could be as comfortable with dignitaries as he is with people in the Ninth Ward. In fact I think he's probably more comfortable with you know, not -- with people with limited means. He just can relate to people on a level that I rarely see, he's that comfortable, and he cares deeply, he loves the city, and he cared about the people. He was very involved immediately after the storm. He was one of the people who was out there rescuing people. He confiscated a school bus just to drive some people out of harm's way. He was on the boats. The National Guard didn't know New Orleans. The Louisiana State Police didn't know New Orleans. So he was there saying, well you need to go to this place, but you probably can't get to that place. So he was really on the frontlines. And he saw that we were facing an incredible challenge, and really I believe had serious doubts about whether the current leader -- he wanted the current leadership to rise to the occasion, and then saw that it would not. And so he made the decision to get involved and run.

RH: When was this? Give me a timeframe.

RK: This was in January. This was actually -- he I'm sure was considering it in December. But he announced the end of January.

RH: So you lived in this intense period, January through --

RK: May.

RH: May. Okay.

RK: Yeah, we made it obviously into the runoff and then had the runoff campaign. I think it was May 20th. So for a good part of four and a half months it was pretty constant. And I didn't know, I just believed in my heart that it was the most important thing for the city of New Orleans that he be elected. And many people felt that way. But obviously not enough. Although I think more and more people are wishing he had been elected. So that was my contribution. I got paid for it but it was a task I took on to be so involved in a campaign in a way that I would never have probably chosen to be under different circumstances. But these are important -- those -- leadership is incredibly important now. And the lack of leadership has I think hurt us pretty dramatically. Not necessarily financially but I think in terms of morale and people making decisions about whether to return or whether to stay.

RH: Tell me what you think of the response, first just in the initial days, of the city, state, federal response. And then later in the recovery.

RK: How do I feel it -- I mean, I haven't read all the books. I don't know intimately who said what when.

RH: Just from what you saw on TV, what was going through your mind?

RK: Well, I don't think anybody can really understand what they were going through, the leadership. But I do think they were not -- nobody was certainly prepared like they should have been. We're talking about recognizing that this could happen at any time for decades. We have. People knew. Now certainly this is a once in a century storm, but to not have adequate evacuation plans or not have adequate buses or not have even called a mandatory evacuation until late in many ways I think was -- inexcusable may be a little strong, but certainly cause for great concern. I think the recovery effort has been a huge disappointment. On the one hand I understand the magnitude is immense. You cross

the Industrial Canal and it's still just a nightmare. But in the areas, the infrastructure, the areas that have come back, to think that you can't get water, will we ever get water pressure, will the streets ever be fixed, will the streetlights ever be repaired, will we ever pick up the debris, what is the future, why don't we have a comprehensive plan yet. We'll have a comprehensive plan in January maybe, which is a year and a half post storm, which means that nobody will be able to get money till six months after that. The ability to receive funds, I know it's complicated and I don't pretend to know the answers, but it's been dragging on for so long that I think people the longer they stay away the less likely they are to come back. And I think there'll be a second wave of people who just decide that this is not where they want to stay, that they can't continue to live like this, it's too hard to raise children, the education system doesn't offer what they would like. We had many members of our congregation who said this just wasn't where they wanted to bring the children. It was too hard. They didn't have the -- they didn't want their kids to have to deal with that kind of pressures, how many times can you pack up and leave, to not feel safe. So I think leadership can inspire confidence, can inspire optimism. I think if anything that's where they've been the most lacking. There's no inspiration, there's nothing that anybody has done or said or educated us about that things get announced but nothing really happens. So you become I guess pessimistic. And think well OK it won't take five years to recover, maybe ten years to recover. I'll be 65, that kind of thing. So these pretty important years of my adult life, is this where I want to stay. But the answer is always yes, and it gets down to because this is where the people you love are. You're going to go to a city where everything works, and be lonely.

RH: Have you lost a lot of friends who've moved?

RK: We've lost not a lot, but a couple of close friends have moved, and I wouldn't be surprised if others -- what has happened is many people have found places and they go there for six months. They evacuated someplace and so then they bought an apartment or something. So they stay there a few months and then come here a few months, that

kind of thing. If they have the resources and the ability to do it that's what I think more people are doing, splitting their time.

RH: So this is almost a second home.

RK: This becomes a second home, exactly.

RH: Wow. So what do you think about -- has racial situation been exacerbated since the storm? Or do you have any thoughts on race and the storm?

RK: Well, I think the storm, this is going to be a little hard for me to verbalize, but I think it put a big spotlight on the racial tensions and inequalities and really the fragility of the racial makeup of our city. We were just -- it was this everything was OK but if you really scratched the surface it really wasn't OK. There was a lot of crime. People felt scared. I think they feel scared again. I think we have -- one of the things I regret is that we haven't used what we learned from Katrina, which is that there is a large number of people who are living in very regrettable and poverty circumstances. And we haven't taken it upon ourselves to use this as a lesson and move towards making changes. I had a very interesting meeting yesterday. One of the clients I do have now or have worked with is I've worked with AmeriCares, which is an emergency relief organization out of Connecticut, and helping them to identify places that might -- they raised a lot of money post-Katrina, and they -- I have been fortunate to be a facilitator of sorts in trying to identify nonprofits that could use the resources that they've raised. So I met with a woman who had come in to start working on a project to build houses in the Ninth Ward. And she said she's worked in Florida, she's worked in New York, she worked in California, she's worked in probably Arizona, she said that New Orleans was the most racist community she had ever worked in. Which was -- she said California was the meanest, but that New Orleans was the most racist. I guess people's interest in -- or I guess lack of interest in equalizing the balance in opportunities for African -- for minorities and whites, fearfulness about blacks in the communities, maybe an interest in not -- in

hoping that as many blacks don't return, I don't know. I was so surprised to hear that. I think the planning process has been perceived in some respects, in some ways as racist.

RH: Do you think it is?

RK: I hope not. I don't. I think there is the potential to be that way. The decisions about whether to redevelop the Ninth Ward versus not redevelop the Ninth Ward. Where city services were going to be reinstated and where they were not. The fact that there's no plan say for New Orleans -- for any of those areas that have been so devastated. Now I recognize that devastation took place in Lakeview, it happened in Broadmoor, it was a non -- economics and race, it was across the board. But those who had resources are rebuilding and those who don't have resources and are waiting for some kind of plan I think those are the ones who have been penalized the most. So by not having a plan I think those with less means have been penalized. So do I think it's racist? No, but clearly those neighborhoods that have resources and people with opportunities can come back more quickly. So excuse me. It's a complicated process, this rebuilding and this planning. I think if we had better leadership it might move more quickly.

RH: What would you like to see in the rebuilding? Certainly you were working in a political campaign.

RK: I think I'd love to see the things that -- neighborhoods that are more user-friendly, more parks, more mixed neighborhoods, more mixed use neighborhoods.

RH: You mean mixed --

RK: Racially --

RH: Generationally?

RK: Generationally. I think our educational system is in a crisis state. It was before and now it's just this patchwork of schools and types of schools being run by different mechanisms in an attempt to try and offer something better. There's no coordinated plan for transportation. There's no coordinated plan for repairing the infrastructure. There's no -- in terms of bringing in for economic development that I know of. They make announcements that Trump Tower's going to be built or that the Hyatt -- or that there's going to be a hotel and city hall complex but nothing's happened there. So I wish that we had the opportunity to really -- now I think the neighborhood, the planning process that's going on now, the 60 some odd different neighborhood groups that are working is what should happen and is happening. So I'm encouraged about that, but I'm not sure how it's all going to tie together and how they're going to make decisions. I don't know who's going to make the hard decisions, guess that's it, about what happens and what doesn't and what can be funded, what will be funded and what won't. And there's a lot of need for people to have money for their housing, and that doesn't leave very much money for anything else, for hospitals, health care. What's happening with health care? [Coughs] So you might need to do some of the talking for a minute.

RH: Just thinking on a personal level, are there any routines that you used to have that don't exist anymore? Or any routines that you've developed now that help sustain you?

RK: Well I think it is routine that has sustained me, I'm like a fixed action pattern. I get up, I work out, I go get some coffee, I sit down at my desk and I start working. And go to meetings if I have to. But that's really -- I think it's the routine that's the comfort. And there really isn't anything that I've had to give up, because I live in a neighborhood where it's pretty much back. And the people I care -- I'm close to are back. And I guess the new routines are having people live with you and living in a multigenerational household. But nothing that's dramatically different. So we're lucky in that respect.

RH: What do you think about the Jewish community?

RK: I think it's going to be much smaller. It is much smaller. I don't see how it could -- they say it's down a third, which is about 3,000 or 3,500 people. I don't think that many Jews are going to come back. It may take decades for it to grow back. I think the health care system would have to grow in order to bring Jewish people back. A lot of physicians might come back. But I think we're going to have to totally restructure the Jewish community communally. Will both JCC campuses survive? Will we have this many congregations? Will there be mergers? I don't know. It won't be any time soon, but there'll be -- you can't pay for -- you can't have a Jewish community that was built and existed for 10,000 Jews to be paid for an supported by 6,500. It just doesn't work. Can't do it. So it'll be different. And there's a planning process happening right now, sponsored by the Jewish Federation. And they're really taking a look at all this, and I hope -- I'm on one of the taskforces, which is to identify additional sources of funding. And --

RH: How's that going?

RK: Well our first meeting is this week, so I'll let you know.

RH: Do you have a sense yourself of where you're going to look?

RK: I think -- well we've been the recipient -- national organizations will help us to a point but not forever. So I really am open to it. I don't know, I think they're going to want to look at some national and out of state resources.

RH: Has the Jewish community as far as you know, has a lot of people with means left the -- do you have a sense of what part of the Jewish community's missing? Or even from Touro?

RK: Well, I think those who have young children, many of them have left, because they sense that it would be a better -- it's not a great place to raise kids. Those who lived in certain neighborhoods have left. There were lots of Jews in Lakeview and in Lakewood

South, and I think many of them who evacuated and stayed with children just decided -- older people decided I was going to move to be with my daughter or my son anyway, I might as well just stay rather than come back and try and rebuild a home. Or they've lost everything, so why come back. So I think that's been a segment of the population that's been hard-hit.

RH: How do you think the Jewish community has conducted itself in this crisis?

RK: I think incredibly well. I can only say the most positive things about the Jewish Federation, what they did post-Katrina in terms of setting up a database and locating people and providing services. They did an incredible job. And I think all the congregations did too, not just Touro, I think they all did, I think all the Rabbis were amazing. And well, all except the one who left. And some people just can't stay. Either based on their family's needs. So but I think the Jewish community has really been very responsive. I think with one caveat. I felt that we were so busy being the recipients that perhaps we could have helped the general community a little bit more. Sometimes the way to heal is by giving back. So I thought -- I tried to institute a program at Touro where we were helping the general community. So we had a couple of programs on stress and we did some neighborhood cleanups. But it wasn't so successful. I think people were so consumed with their own needs in terms of rebuilding and taking care of their families that really it was in many ways probably unlikely that they would have anything additional to give. And that a lot of that work has to be done by people who come in. From other communities.

RH: Has the synagogue itself, have a mission of engagement with the larger New Orleans community?

RK: In what way?

RH: I don't know. Any taskforce or interfaith or -- I think there's the crime group and --

RK: Oh yeah. Right, well there is an interdenominational ministers group that Rabbi Busch is part of. I can't at the moment remember the name of it. It's led by Mike Cowan and it really is -- well it started right before the mayoral election I think to try and have that the religious community would have a dialog and an ability to help shape the -- from their perspective give input to the future of New Orleans. And I know that they got involved in this inspector generals issue in city council. And Rabbi Busch was on the Bush Katrina Fund board helping to make decisions about how money was being distributed through the community. And I think it's really more done on the Rabbinic level than the congregational level. But that might be a good idea.

RH: What has the Jewish community meant to you through this experience?

RK: Well, I think for me, and as well for other people, it's been a huge source of support. Let me just start with the temple. We find that our attendance was incredible considering the number of families back. We had as large or larger attendance at some of our events with half the people back than we did even before the storm. People felt a need to connect and a need I guess for comfort. And so a lot of times they found that at the synagogue. The Jewish agencies have really reached out financially and social service-wise. So for the general community I think it's been a tremendous help. For me I think the synagogue has been a great source of support. But my friends and family have really been I think as much or more. My family as away as well as my family here. I have a brother and two sisters and they don't live here but they've been tremendous, and that's really been a lot of my support system.

RH: How do you connect with them?

RK: Oh I talk to them all the time and email. We're getting together next weekend, the four of us and spouses. They've come in to see New Orleans. They've been here a couple of times. So I think they worry. They're not worried so much now but there was a lot of worry before.

RH: Has anything, your experience or any of your identity as a Jew changed throughout this experience?

RK: [Pause] The reason why I'm hesitating is because I think we're all changed by it. So I've never really -- I feel like I'm a different person now. You can't go through something like this and not be impacted. I never really thought about whether it was a change Jewishly or just in general. And I've always been a pretty -- religion has meant a lot to me. And so I don't know that I could have become more devoted. It was already there.

RH: Are there any teachings or concepts that have sustained you?

RK: Well I think the wanting to help the stranger. I was reading, I was in a study group -- I make it sound -- I went to a regional meeting. And there was a discussion about making the stranger feel at home. I took that to heart. And then another comment, a life without cause is a life without effect, and I thought that's pretty meaningful too. We have -- there's got to be something that all of us can do really. We all have a responsibility now to help in some way. We just can't sit around. We don't have that luxury anymore. We really don't. So it just -- there's a real fragility of life kind of feeling. So you better make the most of it. So is that religious, I don't think so, I think it's just in general.

RH: Tell me about your priorities. How have your priorities changed?

RK: Well, I feel more of a responsibility to make sure my family is taken care of. We all feel that we shouldn't wait. You can't assume that -- it could be gone tomorrow. There's a sense that nothing is forever. So take advantage of circumstances. Be grateful for what you have, don't take anything for granted. They're all cliches, but they really are not cliches anymore. You have to be -- when you're faced with the possibility that you've -- and for many people have -- lost everything, then it makes what you have very very important. Well I take that back. In many ways what you have, but not in a material way. All that in some ways it's not so important anymore. My first reaction after the

storm, and this is a sidebar, is I wanted to get rid of everything, I didn't want to have to worry about whether things had survived. Only people. So I was going to come back, sell my house, downsize, give away everything. That doesn't last long, but it's more about people, and experiences, and making sure that you take care of the people you love, and make an impact in the community, and don't take anything for granted. So I guess that became clearer to me. What you don't know about me is that I was diagnosed with breast cancer when I was 30. And I was given a 50-50 chance to survive. So a lot of that has been part of my life for a very long time. I'm 24 years post surgery now. But I had a ten-month-old and a three-year-old. And so that is right up there with this hurricane in terms of making yourself aware of the fragility of life and time. So it just reemphasized all that for me I think.

RH: Was there any sense from you of why God, I've already been through this, I've learned my lessons?

RK: No. We all get too comfortable I think. No I never, no, not -- I don't think so. I can understand if I had lost a spouse or something like that, but no it wasn't why me. My husband does personal injury work, medical malpractice, and he said he met this most incredible woman who was rendered blind after a botched medical procedure. And he asked that same question to her. He said to her don't you ever wonder why me. And she said why not me, why shouldn't I be the one, maybe that's what I'm the one who can handle it or whatever. I'm not exactly sure how she even -- what she meant by it. But no.

RH: Is there anything you've learned about yourself this past year?

RK: I guess we've all been tested. That's not the same as why me, but I think we've all been tested. And I think I can make it, I think I'm strong enough. I don't want to have to be tested any more, but none of us -- I guess I don't know, it's such an interesting question, what have I learned about myself. What's really important and what's not so important. Things aren't so important, they're nice, I like them, but it's really -- if I really

wanted a street that worked and I guess it's not just personal things, it's things in the city. It gets frustrating and I wish things were better but it really is about -- for me it's about the people. I missed my friends. So I think I was surprised about that, how in many ways dependent I was on the people I cared about, being with them, seeing them, my routines. I guess I'm probably not -- maybe I learned I wasn't as flexible as I thought I was. No I think my husband would agree with that. I'm probably not very flexible. I like my routines, I like my life. I wanted it back.

RH: What does home mean to you now?

RK: Gosh, think it's to be -- it's more -- it's not so physical, it's just where you're comfortable. And a sense of security. Where you know what's going to happen and when it's going to happen and how it's going to happen. Where you have some control over things. I think everybody had the sense of a loss of control, everything was out of their hands. So it's not just -- I guess I felt like I could make a home anywhere. But still I wanted to be back here. I didn't want to stay there. My husband was very happy, he said he was very happy just living in this little apartment with the dog and his mother and his wife, not having to get dressed, not going to work, wearing sandals and shorts. I just wanted to be back.

RH: That's interesting, the native is very happy where he was.

RK: Yeah right, yeah.

RH: Is there anything --

RK: Maybe he's more independent than I am.

RH: Is there anything you would like to add to this interview or anything you'd like to say that we haven't covered?

RK: No. Let me think. I think it's hard for anybody to really know what -- the hardest part is not knowing what the future holds. What the city will be like, what your life will be like in many -- you have the same routines but the life in a broader sense. So I would say that it's somewhat of the fear of the unknown that is maybe what's keeping everybody a little on edge, how long will it take, what will happen, how will it happen, can we afford it, can you get insurance, who's staying, who's leaving, I think it's the uncertainty that's in many ways the hardest part, one of the -- yeah so that would be the only thing I would say.

RH: Are there certain expectations that you have of the larger United States community in the recovery process or something --

RK: Yeah I just -- I can't believe that anybody cares all that much for that long. I have to say. Why should they? Although I hope that there will be an ongoing effort. What I wish is that there would be not only a financial commitment but a commitment about the in many ways -- they're not larger issues but in many -- the racial issues, perhaps the way we let people live in poverty. I wish it would ignite a discussion and effort on that part, in that area, as much as the financial commitment. But I don't think that's going to happen, I really don't. Brian Williams really -- did you watch his coverage at all during the storm? He really -- well that was one of his -- I was so struck by how he thought that was one of the major themes of this catastrophe, was what it said about the way we let certain people live in this country. But I don't know that that's going to happen. So we're a bottomless pit here, we could use all the money they could give us and I'm not sure it would -- we're going to have to take care of ourselves too. So that's about it.

RH: Thank you.

RK: Do you have any other questions?

RH: I have lots of questions for you, they don't all have to be on the tape.

RK: OK, thank you for this opportunity. I really appreciate your asking me.

RH: Thank you. Well you know what? Before you turn it off, I would like to say I am struck by the fact that it might be now total that the presidents of the congregations are women.

RK: That's true. It is. Well not Chabad obviously.

RH: Not Chabad but --

RK: Yeah it was an extraordinary year when all of us were elected. I think there was an article in the Jewish News. The three -- well not on the north shore, but the three Reform New Orleans communities and the Conservative and Beth Israel all --

RH: And Anshe Sfard now.

RK: And that -- who's that?

RH: Lonnie Schaffer was I think just made.

RK: Oh really? Wow. Yeah it's pretty significant. I think somebody should do something.

RH: What's it -- do you talk to one another? Do you work together?

RK: Well we -- that was an amazing positive result of the storm, because for the three, Miriam and Sandy and I started working together very closely. We were on conference calls together. The Union for Reform Judaism spurred it on because they pulled us together. But we continue to meet regularly to support one another and to do some planning together. And the Reform, the presidents of those Reform congregations never really did that before. It was more in many ways competitive as opposed to collegial and so we've remained close. And I don't know whether men would have done it or not but

we had to. We had to, it was in order to survive. And it was a great source of comfort, because all of us felt like there was not -- we weren't doing enough, there was more than we could ever do. We could compare situations in some respects, what were you doing about that. There's still a lot that we don't tell each other in terms of -- but we're all working towards the same cause, which is to make sure that the congregations could come back and survive.

RH: Is there anything you'd like to see more of in the Jewish community that's been happening maybe with the crisis?

RK: No, you know, Rosalind, I think in many ways people are still so caught up in their own personal demands, the demands of getting their houses back or trying to get their businesses up or taking care of family members. I think the Jewish community has really been available for those who have needs. I think the Jewish communal staff has really given when they had their own challenges, personal challenges. They've been there as counselors and planners. No I don't think there's really anything else I would have even expected. I think they've gone beyond.

RH: Is there anything you think as women presidents you bring? I know you said men may have done it the same.

RK: Well, maybe more willingness to accept help, or to ask for help. I think I don't know if we have a greater sensitivity. I think that would be somewhat stereotypical, although I did think it, but I think a willingness to accept help and ask for help maybe.

RH: OK thank you.

RK: Thanks, all right. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]